

**12.10.23****Peace Over Fear****Isaiah 40:1-11****Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

When you hear the word “comfort” what comes to mind for you? Some of us think of comfort food; food that has a nostalgic value and often a lot of calories and carbs, is simple to make or reminds us of a person who used to make it. Cookies, sweet breads, macaroni and cheese, pizza, a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup are popular examples of comfort food. Some of us may think of a comforter or blanket on a cold night when you don’t feel well, or a parent bundling up a child, or even in a medical or emergency setting, we all can appreciate the comfort of a soft, warm blanket.

When do we need comfort and peace? When we’re grieving, hurting, and sick, when we’re feeling sad, concerned about our health and our mortality. When we’re feeling vulnerable, lonely, or uncertain; when it seems like God is hidden, silent, or absent. When we’re going through or have been through a traumatic experience. These are all times we can use comfort, peace, and reassurance. Have you ever felt that way? Some of us may feel that way today. There are a lot of people who need comfort and peace. It’s helpful to know where we can find comfort and peace for ourselves. We also want to be able to share comfort and peace with others.

Today’s scripture from **Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV)** is written to people who are desperately in need of peace and comfort. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah speak of judgment and condemnation to the proud, unfaithful, rebellious inhabitants of Jerusalem. But in chapter 40 the tone shifts dramatically from criticism to comfort. It’s important to understand a significant amount of time passes between the events of chapter 39 and chapter 40. Israel had been exiled to Babylon, from 597- 538 BC (approximately 60 years). It was a terrible time. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed; the treasury had been ransacked; the line of kings descended from David had ended. The priesthood had stopped functioning. The ruined land was under foreign domination. It appeared God had stopped acting on behalf of the people. But then the first words of chapter 40 announce peace and comfort to the exiles. The sufferings of God’s people in Babylon, (foretold in chapter 39:6-7), are over. God hasn’t forgotten them. God hasn’t forgotten us either. Listen to Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV),

**Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.**

2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,

**That her warfare is accomplished,**

That her **iniquity is pardoned:**

For she hath received of the LORD's hand **double for all her sins.**

3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,

Prepare ye **the way of the LORD,**

Make straight in the desert a highway **for our God.**

4 Every valley shall be exalted,

And every mountain and hill shall be made low:

And the crooked shall be made straight,

And the rough places plain:

5 **And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,**

**And all flesh shall see it together:**

For the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

6 The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass,

And all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field:

7 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:

Because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: Surely the people is grass.

8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:

But the word of our God shall stand for ever.

9 O Zion, **that bringest good tidings**, get thee up into the high mountain;

O Jerusalem, **that bringest good tidings**, lift up thy voice with strength;

**Lift it up, be not afraid;** Say unto the cities of Judah, **Behold your God!**

10 **Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand,** And his arm shall rule for him:  
Behold, his reward is with him, And his work before him.

11 **He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:**

**He shall gather the lambs with his arm,**

**And carry them in his bosom,**

**And shall gently lead those that are with young.**

**Isaiah 40:1-11 begins with comfort.** *“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.”* The Hebrew word (naham) is a deeply emotional word, overflowing with feelings of pity and concern. *“Speak ye comfortably”* is literally, *“to the heart.”* The prophet was speaking to an audience that had experienced trauma and whose relationship with God had been deeply wounded as a result. For these people God’s hiddenness was far more real than God’s presence. God’s absence was more real than God’s peace. That’s something some of us can relate to – having a time in our life when God seems hidden, absent, or silent and we don’t know what to think or believe any more and it’s hard to be hopeful or to have a sense of peace.

Against the violent background of Jerusalem’s destruction and the looting and burning of the royal house and treasuries, Isaiah 40 speaks a stunning word of return and restoration. Jerusalem has *“served her term and paid the penalty.”* When we sin, there are consequences, both foreseen and unforeseen. Isaiah had cried out against the spiritual insensitivity of his generation and warned of devastating punishment. But God’s love for the people never wavered. Isaiah speaks directly to the shaken survivors of the destruction by the Babylonians to comfort and console them. God remains committed to His people.

**Isaiah 40 invites us to trust and believe that God is present even when we can’t immediately see where or how, and we feel fear more than we feel a sense of peace.** Choosing peace over fear is often a struggle similar to choosing hope over fear. For some of us, peace may seem more visual than hope, almost like a place.

Think of a place which is peaceful for you, it could be a place where you live, a certain chair or view, a place you walk to, or go away to. Think of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, *he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul*, and how that communicates a feeling and image of peace. Sometimes a cup of tea or coffee or a nice quilt or blanket can comfort us to a degree or for a few minutes, but sometimes we can't be comforted, and nothing seems to give us the peace we desire.

Many people struggle with anxiety and long for peace; long to be shielded from the harshness of life, the pain, the grief, and the suffering. Yet one of the things we all must do is face the harsh realities of life and yet still be able to find peace in the midst of the storms that come to us all. This is where our faith in God, our relationship with Jesus, and our reliance on the Holy Spirit are all crucial assets. When fear and anxiety are depriving you of peace, focus on what you know to be true about the character of God. The God we hear about in Isaiah 40 is both strong and tender, powerful and caring, able to protect and lead even lambs and mother sheep. Standing on the promises of God regardless of how you're feeling any given day, reminding yourself over and over, God is with me, God is light in my darkness, God loves and cares for me no matter what's happening. Instead of being driven by our emotions or by whatever has us afraid, this is where we place our focus. **Isaiah 26:3**, ***“Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you.”***

As with hope, **choosing peace over fear** may mean your specific circumstance or situation hasn't changed immediately, but moment by moment, day by day, I'm going to keep reminding myself of the peace God gives. Jesus speaks about peace with his disciples repeatedly, especially in the Gospel of John saying things like, **John 14:27**, ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*** And in **John 16:33**, ***“I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”***

These two statements by Jesus are crucial in choosing peace over fear. There is a peace we don't attain or achieve; there's an inner peace, a calmness of soul that Jesus gives to those who love and follow him. He doesn't give us peace as the world

gives. Everything the world gives us is temporary. Everything material is temporary including our bodies. Jesus gives a peace that's eternal, that's permanent, that's greater than our troubles and fears. Notice Jesus repeats the phrase, "do not let." "***Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.***" This implies you have a measure of agency and power against troubles and fears, you're not powerless against them. There's a saying in another part of the world about a camel's nose under a tent which is a metaphor for a situation where permitting a small, seemingly innocuous act will open the door for larger, undesirable actions. When fear starts poking its nose under the edge of your tent, that's the time to respond with faith and reminding yourself of the peace Jesus' promises to give. Don't let it further into your tent.

Beyond having peace within us, God's word calls us to seeking and working for peace in our relationships and the world. Our minds are so conditioned by the coercive ways of fear, hostility, and violence that we may shape our lives and perspectives based on justifying violence or assuming the threat of violence from others. Violence rather than peace seems to be as common as the air we breathe. When we continue to allow ourselves to be shaped by the fear and hostility that are so abundant in our world, we can't help but treat others with fear and hostility as well, but none of us want to live in constant fear and hostility. The ability to start making peace in the world around you begins with believing and making peace with the reality that you're deeply loved by God. We can't be peacemakers if we're not first at peace with ourselves. Paul tells us that "***the peace that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.***" (Philippians 4:7). When we take hold of that peace as our own, that's the beginning of being able to produce the words and actions that shows peace governs our hearts and lives.

Paul also writes in **Romans 12:18**, "***If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.***" There are three phrases there, *If it is possible* – it isn't always possible to live peacefully with someone else for a variety of reasons, including that it may not be safe, There are some people and some relationships that are toxic and unhealthy, where there is manipulation, dishonesty, and cruelty, and in these cases, healthy boundaries are needed. *If it is possible*, peace is what we're to aspire to.

If it is possible, *so far as it depends on you*. Understand you're only responsible for you, you can only control and work on yourself. You can't control the other person's feelings, choices, or actions and you shouldn't live in fear of someone else's opinion. For there to be peace, reconciliation, or a healthy relationship, it takes two, but our goal should always be to *live peaceably with all*. With everyone.

Peace is not just the absence of violence. Peace is the pursuit of opposing and dismantling the ways of violence. Peace is proactively seeking justice and flourishing for all people. Peace is actively resisting the ways of death in the world and living God's way of love. Peace is what Christ brings to the world and calls us to reproduce ourselves. Jesus said, *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God*. These are not just lofty ideals or some unthinking pacifism. This is the vision of the world we're given by prophets like Isaiah who foretold what God would do through Jesus Christ.

What does peace sound like, look like, and feel like? Stillness and still waters. Resting in God's presence and faithfulness. Fear is frantic, panic, loud, chaos, confusion, ignorance, violence. Fear can raise our heart rate, blood pressure, and cause us to sweat in fight or flight syndrome. It can make you not feel well or sick to your stomach or give you a pounding headache. Peace feels like the quiet of snowflakes falling softly on the ground, each of them unique. Peace is the colors of the sunrise or sunset and the dependability of that daily fact. Seeing the moon and stars in the darkest skies and knowing God created them, and you. A single candlelight, a baby or young child sleeping, a gentle hug; someone just being with you and saying nothing. These all help us to feel a sense of peace.

Music, depending on what we're listening to or playing, can be peaceful, soothing, and calming. Being aware of your breathing. Trusting God, receiving the peace and comfort of Jesus with every breath. Releasing all the turmoil, emotions, fear, anger, and despair, and leaning into the truth of being a child of God who created me, and an earth filled with beauty. Saying to yourself, *"I'm not alone, You haven't abandoned me, you created me, love me and are with me. You are my hiding place, you are my refuge, you are my peace and my comfort."* Some of you may find our

Wednesday morning prayer group is a good place to pray and rest in God's peace. Others of us find being in a small group beneficial. Sometimes meeting with a professional counselor or therapist can be helpful in talking and working through issues that prevent us from experiencing peace

Isaiah says God comes to bring peace and to comfort, restore, and redeem God's people. John the Baptist quoted Isaiah and tried to help people prepare their hearts and lives for the coming of Christ by turning from their sinful ways. Jesus comes as the embodiment of God's peace, comfort, and love. He promises that he will not leave us alone but when he departs the Comforter, the Holy Spirit will come and be with us. God calls us to comfort one another, as Paul writes in **Galatians 6:2**, "**Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.**" It's important to remember, as the British preacher Dr. John Henry J. H. Jowett (1863-1923) said, "**God does not comfort us to make us comfortable only, but to make us comforters.**" Being a comforter and a peacemaker is part of the calling of every Christian. How are you sharing the peace and comfort of God in your relationships? It can be as simple as sharing words of peace and reassurance; *"I'm here for you; I'm praying for you; God is with you."* Sometimes our presence is more powerful than our words. May you choose peace over fear. Today we have Christmas tree ornaments with the word **peace** for you in the lobby. **May the Peace of Christ be with you.**

**Blessing:** "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved **us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.**" 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Finally, brothers and sisters...listen to my appeal, agree with one another, **live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.** 2 Corinthians 13:11

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is a "comfort food" you enjoy? Have you ever at any age had a favorite blanket or quilt? What made it special?
2. When you've needed comfort or peace, what helped you and why did it make a difference?

3. Look at or read aloud Isaiah 40:1-11. What word or phrase speaks to you or resonates with you the most at this moment?
4. Has there been a time in your life, like for the exiles in Babylon, when God seemed hidden, absent, or silent and you felt no peace? What was going on? If that feeling changed, how did the change take place?
5. Jesus speaks a great deal about peace in John's Gospel in particular. Peace is also spoken of frequently in Paul's letters and is a fruit of the spirit. What does it mean for you when Jesus says in John 14:27, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*
6. Dr. John Henry J. H. Jowett said, *"God does not comfort us to make us comfortable only, but to make us comforters."* How are you answering the call as a Christ follower to be a comforter and a peacemaker?